

M': Adult Education and the Compulsion to Profit

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Abstract: *This paper explores the ways the capitalist drive for profit (in Karl Marx's notation, M') has shaped the theories and practices of adult education. M', we argue, energizes a particular set of social relationships that shape the learning relations of people. Getting a clear sense of the overarching action orientation of people engaged in profit seeking, we suggest, helps clarify the basis of many of adult education's characteristics.*

The field of adult education has long been shaped by the varied crises, reconfigurations, expansions, intensifications, intrusions, incorporations and destructions of capitalism. As a social movement in the 19th and early 20th centuries, adult educators helped people who were cut off from traditional ways of life to adapt to and resist new ways of living in tune with the needs of capitalist industrialization. As a professionalizing discipline in the 20th century, adult educators provided capitalist managers with ways to train workers to operate machinery in increasingly specialized, complex, and regimented factories. With the rise of the capitalist welfare state, adult educators became part of a rapidly growing cadre of civil servants, bureaucrats, health workers, and social workers tasked, as Foucault so aptly describes, with the “pastoral” governance of populations living in the spaces and times of capitalism (Foucault, 2007). Finally, in recent times, especially with the rise of neoliberalism, adult educators have come to play a strong role in promulgating, what Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) describe as, the “projective worker” – a flexible, self-serving, unattached, ever-changing individual who is capable of (indeed solely responsible for) a lifelong process of adaptive learning.

Although the varied discourses of our field contain rich analyses of adult education in capitalist society, there are relatively few investigations of the ways “underlying generative processes” of capital have shaped our field (Harvey, 1996, p. 59). Analyses generally focus on the place of adult education in the elaborated structures of capitalism and not so much on the ways fundamental processes of capitalism specifically affect our field. It is our view that, although

broader investigations of the place of adult education in specific configurations of capital are crucial, exploring the ways capitalism's underlying processes affect adult education can also reveal much. So, in this paper, we focus on a key process of capitalism identified by Karl Marx, the compulsion to M', and identify five ways that this generative process shapes the contours of our field.

M' (Money Prime)

In the opening chapters of *Capital* (1990), Karl Marx details the fundamental relations of capitalism, introducing a range of important concepts like commodity, exchange, use-value, exchange-value, value, and money. In Chapter Four, Marx describes the remarkable emergence of profit-making as the singular drive of capitalist enterprise. Profit emerges at the telling juncture when the exchange of commodities using money takes a peculiar turn. Instead of trading a commodity (C) for money (M) that can be traded for another commodity (Marx summarizes this as C-M-C), capitalists begin to trade money for a commodity that is then traded back for the original sum of money (M-C-M) plus a little extra surplus value ($M' = M + \text{Surplus Value}$). A capitalist with \$1000 dollars (M) can purchase a commodity (C) (say a quantity of iron) and then sell the commodity for \$1100 (M'), to make \$100 profit (Surplus Value). M', according to Marx (1990), captures the “occult” capacity of money, with each circulation, to increase in value (p. 255). Whereas, in earlier forms of exchange, buyers and sellers enter the market to exchange commodities for their use (hence, the Marx's term, “use value”), in capitalist exchange, the capitalist enters the market exclusively in search of profit (M'). As David Harvey (2010) relates, “For Marx, capital is not a thing, but a process – a process, specifically, of the circulation of values. These values are congealed in different things at various points in the process: in the first instance, as money, and then as commodity before turning back into the money-form” (2010, p. 88).

The switch from C-M-C to M-C-M' represents a small but immensely powerful shift not so much in the basic process of exchange but in the intent or purpose of exchange that becomes the unquestioned and unquestionable structure of capitalism. The capitalist enters the process of circulation not to buy commodities for use but to increase his or her money (this is what the market and exchange are for!). And, while one can always conceive of a possible limit to useful consumption, for the capitalist, there is no limit to money. Moreover, as Marx observes, unlike the miser who scrimps and saves to amass money, the capitalist grows money not by stockpiling it, but by throwing it, again and again, into circulation.

What kind of compulsion is this that eight centuries ago emerged to enrapture people in a handful of Mediterranean communities and has now grown and proliferated to the point that it pervades every aspect of our contemporary world. According to Slavoj Žižek (2006), the compulsion to M' is not a mere desire for something to fill a lack we might have. Rather, it has the form of an unspecified and yet insatiable drive in which "the failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object, generates a satisfaction of its own. As Lacan puts it, the true aim of a drive is not to reach its goal, but to circulate endlessly around it" (pp. 63-64). As such, the drive of M' "inheres to capitalism at a more fundamental, systemic, level: drive is that which propels the whole capitalist machinery" (p. 61).

At the same times as authors like Žižek (2006), Karatani (2003), and Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have detailed many of the intricate ways the conditions of capital and the drive for profit have adapted to contemporary culture, there remains an underlying understanding that the change that profit requires never quite touches the historical kernel that underpins its own drive. That is to say, profit has remained an unwavering constant. Likewise, Nigel Thrift (2005) notes that there are many new constellations of profit-drive in contemporary society. Among them are shifts in the "regulation of the rules of possession" that may lead to "new bundles of rights of ownership and even new commodity forms" (p. 5). While Thrift posits some interesting possibilities for new developments around commodity forms, he also notes that "what is most interesting about contemporary capitalism is how these juggernauts of finance and information technology and regulation have interwoven with new developments to produce new possibilities for profit." (p. 5)

Given the magnitude of its importance, it seems that reflecting on the implications of M', stripped

down, as it were, to its starkest outline as a compulsion to profit, is especially important in a field so entwined with the history of capitalism's recent growth and development. We have settled on five ways in which M' has implications for our field.

Focus on Perpetual Change

One of the main outcomes of the emergence of M' is the way it fuels unending growth and change. Profit demands perpetual change (creative destruction) and hostility toward static values. In a world that fetishizes all things new and improved, the orientation to perpetual change feeds our desire to change and transform. This has two consequences for learning. The first is that people must feel that they have changed – a form of personal transformation – with little regard to actual evidence of whether change has occurred. As such, learning becomes inclined to participate in a semi-illusory and superficial engagement of transformation. The second consequence – and converse twin of the first – is that what our society legitimizes as change is dependent on whether this change can generate M' or new forms of profit. In other words, the measure of meaningful learning is figured as the extent to which this learning can contribute to M'.

Fetishization of Knowledge

The second feature of the drive for profit is its valuation of scarce products and specialized skills. There are two consequences of such thought. The first is that various forms of capitalist value are subscribed to things believed to be scarce: The second is that the fetishization of knowledge increases while forms of cognitive ownership exert social priority. This, we would argue, can be read as an over-instrumentalization of learning, but also as an increasingly innocuous metaphor of a so-called knowledge economy. In adult education, the exchange value of services in the teaching/learning relationship takes precedence over the use value of these relations. This feature has been identified before as an attack on the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984), a barrier to learning relationships (Welton, 1995), and a subjugation of women's work in a post-Fordist global economy (Spivak, 1999). Indeed, these are implications of scarcity and the inscription of neo-liberal values over traditional cultural learning relations. But we would also point out that the drive for profit (as a particular occurrence of neo-liberal ethics) can entwine learning in the marketization and commodification of specialized learning experiences. As such, it can be no surprise

that information media, and knowledge brokering has led to vast amounts of recent profit – even in the context of global financial insecurity.

Externalization of Costs

A third effect of M' is the development of policies and procedures to keep investment costs as low as possible. In their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) maintain that in modern capitalism, “the cost of maintaining and reproducing labour have thus been transferred largely to the private individuals and the public sector” (p.251). An effective method for keeping costs low is to transfer or externalize education expenditures, a potentially enormous expense in networked capitalism and the knowledge economy. The relentless hunt for M' has seen businesses offload the costs of educating their workers on to the public and the workers themselves, expecting workers to enter the workplace with a strongly exploitable education. Thus the effect of M' creates a double-barrel gain for business: cost reduction in employee development while increasing human labour power in production.

Externalizing the costs of education by getting new employees to pay for part or all of their own education means that young adults enter the workplace heavily indebted. Heavily indebted workers are comparable to the heavily indebted mortgage holders whom David Harvey (2009) claims, “don’t go on strike...you’ve got your mortgage to pay.” Debt keeps citizens beholden to capitalism by neutralizing potential upheavals within the system.

Within the context of adult education, M' learning outcomes are tied to the bottom line of business. To be effectively measured, learning outcomes must be quantifiable. Education must be perceived as creating economic value from knowledge: as having value for a company. If education lacks quantifiable value it is seen as a waste of resources, as Ruth Rikowski points out, “value is the essential component running through capitalism” (p.172). To this end, the form of double-entry bookkeeping used to keep track of capitalist profits is employed to assess the profit value of education. The amount of resources – time and money – used for education is balanced against the amount of resources – money and product – that education can create. Only quantitatively specifiable outcomes of learning are included in this calculus.

Once individuals transition from the education system to the workplace they become enmeshed within another effect of education and the workplace: if a worker wants to ‘move up’ in a company, or at least, remain relevant, credentials have replaced meri-

toocracy and experience. It is difficult for workers to escape the needs of credentialized education in the workplace as formalized credentials have become the ticket for mobility within the business world. Previously, mobility within the workplace and the business world was angled towards experience and meritocracy but the new spirit of capitalism has recalibrated itself to accede to the demands knowledge economy. Education has become more valuable than experience: an education that has largely been externalized by M' motivation.

Technologization

A fourth effect of M' is the growth and use of productive technologies. Within the context of M' , capital accumulation flows strongest to companies, organizations, and individuals who are best able to engage in the shifting array of projects that characterize modern capitalist production. To increase capital accumulation, capitalists need faster transactions to produce faster capital accumulation. To be most effective, capital must be kept in constant motion. To facilitate the movement of capital, capitalist technology for increasing the speed of exchange and communication has grown from the Pony Express, to the telephone, to the Blackberry.

Needed in the knowledge economy are workers that can understand and have the ability to employ the new technologies. Driven by M' , capitalists favor a notion of adult education that produces workers who are flexible, mobile, and malleable; who are willing to pay for their own education; and who can fit seamlessly into a constantly unfolding array of ventures that are the mainstay of enterprises under the compelling force of M' . As technology changes, those unable to compete or whose positions have been taken over by technology are cast-off or alienated from the workplace.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) detail how modern workers must be physically mobile and able to adapt their skills to be able to succeed in the modern capitalist system. At the same time as they are mobile, however, modern technology ensures that employees are captured, monitored, and tethered to the workplace. As Herbert Marcuse relates, it is a situation of, “servitude in the guise of technology” (1991, p. 17). As well, technology continues to distort our understanding of time and space. The vast foreshortening of space and time in capitalism renders workers precarious as other regions develop and offer cheaper labour markets, more efficient production technologies, and more efficient philosophies of work.

The need for productive technologies within the realm of the knowledge economy has business becoming more involved within the externalized education industry, as capitalists want to be at the forefront, and tapped into, an education system that creates and produces exploitable technologies, knowledge, and workers. Due to business having a strongly vested interest in educational outcomes and credentials, externalized education becomes enmeshed in strategically selected programs created to meet the demands of industry. Overseeing the overall program are international organizations such as the OECD, who themselves are under the sway of neoliberal policies, who influence member states to promote educational programs that match M's demand for profit. M' and its use of education and technology wrap people up in a world of consumerism and efficient production. As Joel Spring (1998) relates:

Free market economists working in these global organizations (OECD and the World Bank) use education policy to create conditions that supposedly support market economies. However, the use of education policies for these purposes creates situations where the individual worker is manipulated by the state in the interest of the marketplace. (p. 128)

As industry becomes enmeshed within the adult education discourse, it becomes seen less as a public or common good and more as a private commodity. As Harvey (2005) observes, "the corporation and privatization of hitherto public assets (such as universities)...indicate a new wave of 'enclosing the commons'...the power of the state is frequently used to force such processes through even against popular will" (p. 148). Those who do not have the necessary skills set are shunted out of the capitalist commons and become part of an auxiliary workforce.

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Capitalism's combined need to externalize the costs of education and to produce exploitable technologies has resulted in the creation of an education industry. Education has become a valued commodity both in surplus value production and in the production of value. As an externalized industry, it operates with the same imperatives as any other business – to create profit. M' has helped turn education into an industry both to drive the wheels of knowledge capitalism and to produce profit in its own right.

Need for Legitimation

A fifth effect of M', springs from its ultimate irrationality and from the great harms it inevitably comes to produce. Adult education, in this case, is commanded directly by capitalists to generate hegemonic conditions conducive the maximization of M'. This entails the production of a compliant population convinced of the unquestionable and inevitable nature of social relations under the sway of M'. Adult education does this by helping produce compliant workers, aiding in the promulgation of liberal ideology, glorifying capitalist technology, and fostering adaptive but unchallenging communities.

Conclusion

These are but a few of the ways M' has shaped and continues to shape adult education theories and practices. Focusing specifically on the effects of M' in such a manner, we contend, provides an uncluttered critical focus that adult educators can use to shape their practices to resist the harms generated by the compulsion to profit.

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